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Editorial: Playfulness, games and playful learning to promote good

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Editorial on the Research Topic

Playfulness, games and playful learning to promote good

In the context of the “*Playfulness, Games, and Playful Learning to Promote Good*” initiative, we asserted that health and well-being are widely regarded as the most precious values in our lives, and the promotion of good is a global goal in education. Echoing the conclusions of various scholars, we acknowledge that play and well-being share a symbiotic relationship (Proyer, 2013; Tonkin and Whitaker, 2019). Additionally, according to Whitaker and Tonkin (2019), the widespread recognition of the significance of green spaces and the global adoption of healthy settings approaches align well with the growth of a worldwide movement of play and playfulness. The “*Playfulness, Games, and Playful Learning to Promote Good*” call aimed to embody this idea and solicited empirical and theoretical contributions that delve into the insights, benefits, and challenges associated with playfulness, play, and playful learning across education and general life. Ultimately, five research papers were published, each providing novel empirical evidence on play and playfulness across diverse contexts, including early childhood education and higher education.

In her study, Ugaste investigated the impact of changes in access to play spaces and time on childhood memories among three generations in Estonia. Individual interviews were used to retrospectively explore perceptions of play with 98 respondents. The findings highlight the importance of freedom and diverse play options for children, revealing variations across urban and rural settings. In addition, the research gives evidence of manifestations of all the dimensions of playfulness defined by Lieberman (1977) in the respondents’ memories. Interestingly, the respondents mainly associated playing memories with outdoor play that involved joy, fun, and excitement by connecting playing primarily with movement, physical activity and various motor activities, especially in the open air. This raises questions about the role of outdoor play in previous decades compared with the 20th century.

Outdoor play is globally widely recognized as essential for children’s well-being, encompassing physical, cognitive, social, emotional, and environmental aspects. It promotes several key skills, like sensory integration skills (e.g., Yogman et al., 2018) and executive function development, particularly when it happens in nature, that is the context in which children’s play was promoted in the research by Ernst et al.. They investigated the impact of nature-based practices on preschoolers’ executive function, and found that incorporating such practices in preschool significantly improved children’s executive function skills. However, their research shows that preschools with a blended approach, integrating some nature-based practices, were notably more effective, contributing valuable insights to effective strategies for executive function development and expanding the understanding of the influence of nature play on child development.

Although we have a lot of research evidence on the benefits of outdoor and nature-based learning, we are in many countries faced with the fact that the increasing prevalence of existing and emerging environmental and societal risks may pose new challenges for children's outdoor play in the future. Additionally, it's worth noting that outdoor play and nature spaces are not necessarily extensively accessible in all countries. However, education policies should put more emphasis on the development of safe urban and nature-based play areas for promoting play at all ages. In Finland, outdoor play and nature-based activities play an important role in education, specifically in early childhood education, such as play-based pedagogies.

In their article, [Melasalmi et al.](#) explored pre-service teachers' understanding of agentic playfulness, revealing three domains: teacher-initiated, child-centered, and community-shared agentic playfulness, influencing the nature of their orientation toward playfulness and positioning themselves in pedagogical contexts. The authors emphasize that while children's learning is often understood through the lens of play, playfulness itself has received limited scholarly attention, especially in educators' practices. The findings have implications for the pedagogization of play, relational pedagogy, and teacher education in fostering ECE teachers' agentic playfulness. So far, teachers' playfulness is less studied compared to children's ([Proyer, 2012](#)) although playful educators can be seen as key in implementing play-based pedagogies (see also [Whitton, 2023](#)). [Whitton \(2023\)](#) argues playful teachers are more likely to achieve better outcomes using playful approaches.

[Hurme et al.](#) explored playfulness as a part of early childhood education (ECE) teachers' pedagogical orientation and adaptive expertise. The aim of the study was to examine pre-service ECE-teachers' perceptions of their own playfulness and possible differences between first- and third-year-pre-service ECE teachers' perceptions. Based on multiple playfulness measurements conducted to pre-service ECE-teachers, and follow-up statistical analyses, the findings show that pre-service ECE teachers perceived themselves as highly playful persons, although some (5 %) of them did not recognize their playfulness. Moreover, the results reveal that ECE pre-service teachers had different orientations toward playfulness. The results brought out the aspects of playfulness, adaptiveness and inquisitiveness. Adaptive expertise together with playfulness and adaptiveness seem to develop over time through experiences and reflections. Playful teachers who show inquisitiveness are curious and eager to learn and understand. The research suggests that playfulness and playful learning methods should be more explicitly integrated into the curriculum in teacher education programmes which the Finnish contexts mean the development of higher education.

[Heljakka](#) in her article considers adult playfulness and playful approaches in higher education. By playful approaches she refers to learning processes which engage students in imaginative and innovative learning challenges, fostering intrinsic motivation through learning by doing. She suggests that integrating playful learning methods, resembling those in entrepreneurial education,

can cultivate a flexible, entrepreneurial mindset and contribute to playful resilience among learners. This can be seen also as features of adaptive learners. A benefit of playful learning approaches is that they can provide a safe environment for experimentation and creative problem-solving. In the article, [Heljakka](#) argues that playfulness in fact has notable similarities with resilience. This relates to the claim that playfulness may help learners cope with stress, and thus contribute to their well-being through growing confidence ([Heljakka; Chang et al., 2013](#)).

Overall, these studies enlighten play and playfulness from different angles and different contexts and stakeholders: adults' childhood memories, children in nature play, pre-service teachers in higher education and adult playful learning. The value of these studies is in their novelty in the scientific arena. Existing research history about play and playfulness in educational contexts has focused mainly on finding relation between children's play and development and teachers' proficiency to integrate play and learning (e.g., [Kangas, 2010](#); [Cheng, 2012](#); [Pyle and Danniels, 2017](#)). The topics are still relevant, but the next step should arise to educational policies for providing outdoor and nature play affordances for children for rich play experiences ([Siklander et al., 2020](#)) and for curricula and methods in higher education for educating experts in playful pedagogies. For both directions—children and teachers—engagement is central in any pedagogical contexts ([Kangas et al., 2017](#); [Masek and Stenros, 2021](#)).

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Conflict of interest

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